Indigenous History of the Pilbara

STONEFISH

Jariiwarrundarri warnkurra
Tarramarra puripunga
Kalaialakuda janamba
Todarra uraanpirri
Paruparula wallillinba
Mirurru jindananarra
Pilbitirri mirurru
Widi nailmarni

Dark blue is the sea
The deep water smell falls,
Two with a net stick each going
Like pelicans stooped.
In the net swarming around
The deep sea wonders,
The flat fish wonder,
Marked with many colours, the stonefish

Tabi (song) in Njijapali language
By: Piniingu
**EARLY CIVILISATION**

Human occupation of the Australian continent is estimated between 30,000 and 80,000 years. It is believed that Australia’s Indigenous people journeyed over the Pilbara craton from Indonesia when seas were low. The last ice-age occurred between 14,000 and 25,000 years ago, archeological evidence suggests that the Pilbara coastline acted as a refuge during this period. Post glacier, Aboriginal people began to move inland. It is believed between 2000 and 4000 years ago, most areas of the Pilbara region were either occupied or had been transversed. (Quin, 2000).

**LIFESTYLE**

In the dry months, life was centred near the coast on rivers such as, the Fortescue, Sherlock, Yule, Shaw and De Grey, (Quin, 2000). Around the waters edge, Aboriginal people enjoyed a rich diet of mixed red meats, fish, reptiles, grubs, eggs honey, fruits and root vegetables. Hunting grounds were made distinguishable by certain aspects of the landscape and through extensive burning, natural ‘paddocks’ were created to attract grazing kangaroos, (Marsh, 1980). Rainfall was often minimal so survival depended on knowledge of waterhole locations. The season lead groups to water through wind direction or by the emergence of animal or plant species at particular times of the year, (Marsh, 1980). Aboriginal people of the Pilbara depended on a semi-nomadic food gathering and hunting economy that was embraced by their social and spiritual life. Cultural practices, trade routes and mythological associations based the foundation for a myriad of unique and intricate societies. Exact figures are hard to attain but prior to colonisation there were an estimated 20-30 social/language groups in the Pilbara region,
(Karijini Aboriginal Corporation, 1996). Each of these groups had their own language, spiritual mythologies and social organisation. Most have members fitting into one of four skin groups, Karrimarra, Burunga, Banaka or Balyirri, (Exile, 1993). These skin classifications form the basis for rules regarding marriage, behaviour, obligations and social organisation. (Exile, 1993; Quin, 2000).

**SPIRITUALITY**

The concept of ‘Dreaming’ must first be explored, before one can comprehend the people of the Pilbara’s connection to country. The world began when ‘Mardga’ the creation spirit lifted the sky up from the sea and shaped the land when the world was soft. The first corroborree made the land hard creating ‘Biridiya’ or law. This law carried to all tribes in the north west. Country, today is the delicate impression of the ancestral beings that once roamed the earth. To the Banjima, Gurrama, Injibarndi, Ngulumi, Maduthunia and Yaburara people these beings are the ‘Mingila’, (Exile, 1993). To others the name is different but the concept is the same. Dreaming is the place of spirit where past, present and future unite, where there is no time. The dreaming determines all relationships with every creature on the land and influences everyday life, (Edwards, 1990). It is the essence of ‘Country’ that connects the individual to the spirit world. Connection is maintained through honour, preservation, celebration and ceremony.

**EARLY COLONIAL IMPACT**

The Dutch were the first to sail up the north west coast in the early 1600’s, but it was the British who first colonised the state of Western Australia in 1829. F.T Gregory was the
first pioneer to make the trip north to the Pilbara region. He was quickly followed by pastoralists who brought with them diseases such as smallpox and influenza. Having never encountered the diseases before, Aboriginal people were killed in their hundreds. Dench, 1995, claims that bodies could be found in surrounding mangroves for months, and at night, people could be heard howling in agony, (cited Karijini Aboriginal Corporation, 1996). Three large scale massacres were recorded in the Pilbara region, in the late 1800’s. The most remembered of these, the ‘Flying Foam Massacre’, involved the slaughter of 40-60 Aboriginal men, women and children in retaliation to the spearing of a police constable, his Aboriginal assistant and two pearlers, (Exile, 1993; Roebourne website1).

**PASTORALISM**

Those who survived disease and dislocation were forced to work on pastoral stations. When the pastoral industry made its way north, Indigenous laws of land ownership were disregarded. At the turn of the century Aboriginal people worked on stations as stockmen, builders, fencers, horse breakers, gardeners, child minders and servants, (Quin, 2000). The Pilbara folk were exploited as cheap labour, often receiving rations as payment. Freshwater springs quickly became polluted with sheep and cattle faeces and sacred sites desicrated. In order to survive, many families had to move closer to pastoral homesteads, or else starve, (Karijini Aboriginal Corporation, 1996). Convicts were needed in the south so the industry was reliant on Aboriginal labour, (Marsh, 1988; Roebourne website1). Precious land prepared for kangaroos was also quickly taken advantage of. Pastoralists found the open landscape had good soils and excellent pasture.
for their flocks, (Halam, 1975, cited Marsh 1988). Kangaroos were considered pests and were culled in the hundreds. Those unable to work on stations such as the young and old were mostly forced into government reserves, others were lucky enough to live in gumpys and shacks around the outskirts of the station. (Exile, 1993).

‘PINDAN MOVEMENT’ 1946 PASTORAL STRIKE

The first reported strike meeting was held in 1942 and recorded attendance in excess of 200 people. 23 language groups were represented, accompanied by 16 interpreters (McLeod, 1985). The meeting lasted 6 weeks and detailed basic arrangements for strike action in effort to raise pastoral wages to 30 shillings a week, (Port Hedland website). On May 1\textsuperscript{st} 1946, the first phase of strike action occurred, involving over 800 hundred people and affecting as many as 25 different stations. Strikers were physically threatened by their bosses, harrassed by police and imprisoned (McLeod, 1985). At one stage in 1947, 66 strikers were in custody, most of them for trying to persuade workers from other stations to join them. 33 alone had been arrested at Marble Bar for helping more anxious people who were more threatened and intimidated by their employers. Strikers were often held without bail. By 1949 stations had begun paying workers their requested 30 shilling a week wage. (Port Hedland Website) Another outcome was the formation of an Aboriginal mining co-operative, the first of its kind in Australia, (Symon, 2000).

PEARLING

The pastoral industry was quickly followed by the pearlers who established industry in Cossack. Aboriginal people were in great demand as divers and shell collectors. In 1869
labour was so scarce that pearl merchants and entrepreneurs began sailing south, along the coast recruiting, kidnapping and chaining men and women to fulfill their industry needs. People were taken to pearling grounds hundreds of kilometres away and abandoned to fend for themselves when the season was over, (Roebourne website1). There were laws against slavery but without anyone to enforce them, coastal populations faced devastation, (Karijini Aboriginal Corporation, 1996).

THE MISSIONS

Pilbara Missions, first arose in the 1920’s. Prison-like conditions split up families. Assimilationalist policies accompanied by the 1905 Aborigines Act saw the removal of children. Often sent hundreds of kilometres south, into special homes or institutions children were trained as domestic slaves and stockmen. Authorities needed to find a solution to the labour crisis and it was believed that if the Aboriginal ‘problem’ could be solved through Christian missionaries, the labour shortage would be alleviated, (Marsh, 1980). McLeod (1985) suggests that churches were brought in only after poisonings and shootings had been terminated.

People were dependent on the missionaries for all their basic needs. Aboriginal people were denied access to their culture, language and law. Even tribal marriage customs were interfered with, (McLeod, 1985). Missionaries were responsible for carrying out the work of the government in the ‘civilising’ of Aboriginal people, (Marsh, 1980). One report in the Wyndham area in 1938 detailed horrific stories of rape and the
shooting of so-called ‘escaping’ inmates, (M’cLeod, 1985). This is just one of many stories.

WORLD WAR TWO

On May 3rd 1942, news of the Broome bombings spread quickly throughout the north west and many white families were evacuated to Perth. In August, bombs struck the town of Port Hedland. The town’s people appealed to the Indigenous community to assist in the war effort. With the promise of equal treatment many folk enlisted. This caused a backlash down south as the number of dark faces in Port Hedland increased, as a result Indigenous people were banished from town unless they had an entry permit, (Brown, 1976).

A consequent meeting took place proposing a resolution, suggesting all Indigenous people of mixed decent be granted equal status. This was a turning point in history. The proposal reached the Premier and due to the urgency, a new Act was introduced setting out conditions under which Aboriginal people of mixed decent could attain citizenship in 1944. Under the Act, a person of mixed decent had to show that they had not associated with ‘full blood’ relatives for at least two years, were free of venereal disease and leprocy, could basically read and write and finally show that having citizenship would be to their advantage. (all points cited Brown, 1976). While these conditions reflect racist, assimilation policies, in WW2, 3000 Aboriginal people of mixed decent served in the armed forces. (Port Hedland website).
MINING

New mining towns were established in the early 1960’s. With the advancement of new technologies in the pastoral industry and the introduction of award wages in 1968 many families were forced off properties and into camps around town. The mining boom saw many white, single men flock towards opportunity, leaving many Aboriginal people unemployed, (Exile, 1993). Ration camps in the Table Lands began to shut down in the late 1920’s and many groups were forced to live in Roebourne (Nguluma country). For the Injibarndi people, the sea snake ‘Wharlu’ was fiercesome. The Injibarndi people, like other displaced tribes felt unsafe and unwanted in their new environment, (Exile, 1993). Iron ore companies with the help of the state government built new towns in Wickem, Parabadoo, Dampier, Panawanaka and Tom Price. The towns were built for the miners, so again, Aboriginal people faced relocation.

FROM THERE TO HERE

A SENSE OF PLACE

When the very essence of your life is taken away, like a line of dominos, the momentum pushing you down can be the easiest way to fall. All of humanity once danced to the heartbeat of the land, I believe. Through time the binding faded and the world saw the evolution of disconnected, materialism in some detached cultures. I can only speak for myself when I attempt to comprehend the effects that the last 200 years of colonisation had on Aboriginal people. Even if I can’t ever have all the knowledge, I can say that nothing should be considered too much in the needed healing process. It is no-one elses
right to determine what is reasonable in the rebuilding of culture and family. I can only talk about my ‘Sense of Place’ when I think about the Pilbara. I can try to understand the current situation, for Aboriginal people but I haven’t ever been there and feel by relying on documents I may just be adding to the perversity of past behaviours.

I can be sure about some things. To begin with prior to European colonisation, a system of land ownership existed and to this day, economic benefits of the mines have yet to reach local communities. The mining town of Wittenoom had accommodated Aboriginal people (one of the few). It was built to service the nearby asbestos mine and recent research carried out by the Asbestos Working Party has found a large number of Pilbara Aboriginies suffering form Mesothelioma disease and other asbestos related illnesses, (Karijini Aboriginal Corporation, 1996). There are also many folk suffering from the 1952 and 1956 British nuclear bombings in the Montebello Islands. People in the surrounding district were moved, however security was insufficient and many people were exposed to radiation, (Smith, 2002). Errors made in weather predictions lead to communities at Welbourn Hill collecting dust from explosions over vegetable gardens and rainwater tanks, (James, 2001). As a result the people of Welbourn Hill have suffered premature deaths, chronic asthma, sinustis, infertility, birth deformities and miscarriages. Finally and most importantly communities are still forced to live in foreign tribal land and have been unable to return from where they had been removed. Land claims are underway in the Pilbara and this is a key step in the fight towards rebuilding culture and reconnecting with country, the essence of their spiritual wellbeing.
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(Poem) Stonefish

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